As each new school year begins, it is important to remember that relational trust is the foundation of community building and the social cement of a school. Every school, every year experiences some turnover — principal or vice-principal, teachers, and staff, as well as students at the classroom — and these changes, at both the school and district levels, demand our continual attendance to building and maintaining relational trust whether as a continual process (Greenberg, 2007) or as a discipline (Covey, 2006). Relational trust affects not only our individual and collective performance at school and our chances for reform (Bryk & Schneider, 2002 & 2003; Bolam et al., 2005; Covey, 2006; Hargreaves & Fink, 2006) but also our personal and collective physical safety (Feldman & Johnson, 1998; Greenberg, 2007). As Covey (2006) describes it, low levels of trust act as a “tax” on performance — decreasing positive interactions and productivity while increasing timelines and costs. People are more likely to assume malintent even when communication is painstakingly crafted. However, when you have a high level of trust in an organization, it acts as a performance multiplier increasing positive interactions and productivity while decreasing timelines and costs. People are more likely to assume good intent even when communication might be poorly phrased (Covey, 2006). This is supported by the work of Hargreaves & Fink (2006) as well as Bryk & Schneider (2002, 2003).

Trust is the social lubricant in any organization—schools included. Bryk & Schneider (2002, 2003) stress the importance of interpersonal relations and personal regard in building trust. Personal regard includes care among individuals not only on a professional level but also on a personal level as well as a willingness to extend ourselves on behalf of others. Kochanek (2005) refers to one category of trust building exchanges as “low-risk exchanges that promote positive discern-
ments of respect and personal regard” (p. 80). The activities proposed in this article fall into two types of Kochanek’s (2005) trust building actions: “setting the stage for trust and creating opportunities for low-risk interactions” (p. 80). Kochanek (2005) says, “Setting the stage for positive interactions involves putting people in a position where the development of trust is possible … [using] mechanisms that ease the sense of vulnerability teachers and parents may have so that they will enter into low-risk exchanges” (p. 19). Extending this concept, I believe that it is critical to extend the use of trust building mechanisms to ease the sense of vulnerability that students have as well — especially when you factor in the power dynamics of the student-teacher or student-administrator relationships.

Kochanek (2005) goes on to say that after setting the stage, opportunities for low-risk interactions should be created “to promote the exchange of respect and personal regard” (p. 22). According to Kochanek (2005), “Bringing people together in fun activities … is an easy way to encourage positive interactions in which they [people] will treat one another with respect and personal regard” (p. 26). Bryk & Schneider (2003) conclude that “Even simple interactions, if successful, can enhance collective capacities for more complex [and higher risk] subsequent actions” (p. 43).

This article proposes a fun method to both set the stage and provide opportunity for low-risk exchanges as the eventual basis for higher-risk, more complex interactions. It provides a means for individuals to share bits of personal information that establish them as people beyond their roles — i.e. principal, custodian, teacher, secretary, etc.— thereby laying the foundations for relational trust. We build trust so that we as educational professionals may build a community that collectively achieves more for and with our students while also making our schools intellectually, emotionally, and physically safe.

Trust building exchanges, such as those proposed here may have significant safety implications for a school. In 2007, Greenberg advised campus security to build trust through relationships with students because “A trust-based relationship becomes the catalyst for the most effective [violence] prevention measures, and is the foundation of prevention and interdiction” (p. S58). Greenberg (2007) goes on to state that campus security needs to, “… Recognize the need to continuously maintain and cultivate critical relationships and communications strategies due to turnover among officials, faculty, students, and law enforcement. Building trust requires more than simple information sharing. Repeated sessions with students, high visibility by key administrators, faculty involvement, student relationship with police and security personnel, and the involvement of special interest groups are paramount to building trust.” (p. S58)

It might be possible that in personalizing each other, in sharing low-risk information beyond our professional role — while still maintaining acceptable borders between professionals and students that are, in the terminology of the British Columbia College of Teachers (BCCT), neither “blurred
nor ambiguous” (Readers weigh in on Facebook, 2008, p. 20) — we can further develop an atmosphere of humanity in our school communities that reduces the chances of violence among members while extending their capacities. Building relational trust with and among our students, our staff, our faculty and other educational stakeholders might be one way for us to accomplish this.

The activities that follow in this article are proposed as concrete steps that might help you, your school and/or district build some bonds of relational trust. Thanks to the support and suggestions of my colleagues, Professors George Kelly and Paige Fisher, I was able to successfully include this activity as part of our Faculty of Education student orientation at Vancouver Island University in September 2008. It was well received. I hope it works for you.

Introducing the activity to principals, vice-principals, teachers and staff

If your learning community is unfamiliar with the concept of relational trust, prior to sharing this concept with others, prepare by providing them with some quick background reading on relational trust (e.g. excerpts from the preceding section of this article, my October 2007 Adminfo article, “Assessing Trust”, or Bryk & Schneider’s 2003 article “Trust in Schools: A Core Resource for School Reform” in Educational Leadership, 60(6)). If, after the introduction of “relational trust”, this activity is accepted in concept, it is important to have all people participate in an informed and voluntary manner. A group should assume responsibility for organizing this activity.

The Concept: A quiz game show

The activity proposed is a fun quiz game “show” where individuals match a series of personal statements with the respective principals, vice-principals, teachers and staff who submitted them. This game allows individuals to share select, appropriate pieces of personal information that support the development of relational trust among school stakeholders. This type of sharing also personalizes the individuals with regard to students and other participants while still maintaining the professional boundaries as currently defined by the BCCT. When done properly, this activity provides a foundation for more challenging interactions and could have significant effects for building bonds between adults and students (especially those who feel most vulnerable), as well as among adults connected in the school context.

Pre-game organization

To get the most from this activity, the scheduled game day and time should be one when the school is most likely to have everyone in attendance (a day with minimal field trips, away games, etc.). The organizing group also needs to establish basic game rules. For example, is the game played individually or in teams? If school or district personnel are absent on the day of the activity, how will their data be handled? Do you want to reveal them at the outset, give their items as “freebies” or play them out just like all the rest? Do you want to run the activity in one assembly or split it between a morning and afternoon assembly? Do you want to give prizes (and what are the criteria for awarding prizes)? Who will host? To reach out to the larger community, administration (with approval from the local school board where appropriate) might think about enlisting the local media to do a feature article on this activity as a way for the community to get to know the school staff.

After the school or district has settled on the when, where and how of the game, all staff, faculty and administrators should be provided time to draft an appropriate phrase for themselves — which I call a “personal factoid.” The organizing group should provide some examples and specific guidelines as to what types of information would be deemed appropriate. These factoids might resemble something like:

- Father of 6 boys,
• Likes to dance tango;
• Planted trees in Africa.

One person from the organizing group is designated as the information collector to collect all personal factoids, and key them to the individuals who provided them. The advantage of restricting the data collection to one person is that the activity can also hold interest for the other individuals contributing data — even the organizers. As the best way to manage this information is electronically, the collector should have some skill at using word processing software, as well as building and sorting data in tables. It helps to work from a school or district directory — especially if you can get it in an electronic form you can edit. The collector might need to screen the submitted statements for appropriateness. If a factoid is questionable — or even possibly questionable — the collector can quietly approach the respective individual to obtain an alternative. As the factoids are turned in, the collector enters the information collector to collect all personal data into a table. If a factoid is questionable submitted statements for appropriateness, the collector might need to screen the submitted statements for appropriateness. If a factoid is questionable — or even possibly questionable — the collector can quietly approach the respective individual to obtain an alternative. As the factoids are turned in, the collector enters the data into a table.

With the factoids in hand, the collector builds a presentation to run the quiz game show, and a game answer sheet for the players. (Complete instructions are available at http://www.bcpvpa.bc.ca/downloads/trust.pdf)

**Before game day**

For anything that depends on technology, I always stress the importance of a dry-run or rehearsal. At least one day prior to actually running the game, set up the digital projector and the computer you will use on the day the game will run. The game “host” — and any other presenters — should make sure that everything is projecting well and moves along smoothly. Try to limit exposure of the quiz game content to the minimum number of people to keep the questions and answers fresh for game day. Adjust the hardware, process, and/or content as necessary. Don’t forget to run off enough quiz game sheets for all participants — unless you’re using clickers. Also, if you are planning to give out prizes, make sure you have them “in-hand” and ready.

**Playing the game**

On the scheduled day and time, students and personnel assemble in one area. Each student — and/or individual — is given a quiz game sheet to mark their entries. (If you’re more technically advanced, you might use clickers instead.) School or district personnel are introduced to the assembled group in the predetermined order (e.g. alphabetical, by role, by department, etc.) with some description of what s/he does in the school. The game host begins the presentation — first describing why the activity is being run, and how the game works — before launching into the actual quiz game. After showing the Master Question Slide (a slide with all game show questions but no answers), participants are permitted sufficient time to complete the quiz. Once that time has elapsed, the host begins to reveal each question and the person associated with it. At the end of the game, the host determines who had the most correct matches.

For example with a list of 30 items, the host might start with “Who had more than 3 correct?”; “Who had more than 5?” etc. The activity concludes with some school-wide discussion of:

• the importance of feeling “known by” and connected to one or more adults at the school;
• relational trust;
• the school or district’s commitment to relational trust as a factor in everyone’s success and safety;
• the school or district’s commitment to student success — from academic growth to personal and social growth.

**Final word**

Building relational trust is a process and a discipline, to which we must attend even in our smallest interactions. My hope is that this game will provide a fun way for you to foster Kochanek’s (2005) “respect and personal regard” (p. 26) in your school, district, and/or community as well as a way to increase your “collective capacities for more complex [and higher risk] subsequent actions” (Bryk & Schneider, 2003, p. 43). Let me know about your experiences — or variations — on this activity. Your feedback might provide the basis for a follow-up article.

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References for this articles are available by email, rwilliams@bcpvpa.bc.ca